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# The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

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# *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*

*Terryl L. Givens*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, also known as the Mormon or LDS church, constitute an organization that transcends simple denominational status. Though the Mormons were originally one of a multitude of restorationist churches emerging out of the ferment known as the Second Great Awakening in the early nineteenth century, a number of factors conspired to forge an entity variously considered a religion, a people, a global tribe, and a New Religious Movement (NRM), the only “indigenously derived ethnic group” in the United States and an emerging world religion. Mormonism’s distinctive doctrines challenge the boundaries of Christian orthodoxy, while a history of persecution and exile fostered a close-knit Mormon community with fierce intragroup loyalties. In addition, authoritarian leadership and superefficient worldwide correlation of all church programs and instructional materials establish an uncommon degree of uniformity and conformity, while unusually intense requirements of sacrifice, commitment, lifestyle practices, and service far surpass the norms of a nominal, Sunday-only Christian observance. One of the fastest growing churches in the world, Mormonism has enjoyed a colorful history characterized by charismatic beginnings, new scripture, and violent confrontation with its host society that gradually was transformed into its current position of utmost respectability in mainstream American society. Once condemned by non-Mormon preachers and politicians, Mormons are now lauded by observers as “the American religion”<sup>1</sup> and praised by presidents and public figures for their family values, clean living, healthy lifestyle, and humanitarian outreach to members and nonmembers alike.

## **HISTORY**

The founder of Mormonism, Joseph Smith (1805–1844), dated the commencement of his life’s labor—the restoration of the Gospel of Jesus Christ—to 1827. That was the year an angelic messenger who identified himself as Moroni directed Smith

to retrieve from an upstate New York hillside a set of gold plates. This was not Smith's first encounter with heavenly visitors. As a youth of 14, he experienced a vision of God and Jesus Christ, who appeared in answer to his personal quest for the true religion. This experience, which he apparently regarded as a personal one only, gave him no authority to inaugurate a religious movement. But three years later in the fall of 1823, Moroni appeared for the first time, told Smith "that God had a work for [him] to do," and unfolded to him a remarkable story. Moroni described an ancient record that detailed the history of some early inhabitants of the North American continent, contained "the fulness of the everlasting gospel," and recorded a visit of Christ to that same people. Moroni returned to Smith yearly four more times, before indicating the burial spot of the plates and allowing Smith to remove them. Smith was also given a device with which to translate them. At some point in the translation process, Smith realized that his work extended beyond the translation and publication of the plates as the Book of Mormon, which was published in March 1830, to include the restoration of priesthood authority and (re)establishment of the true church of Jesus Christ. Formal organization of this entity, initially called the Church of Christ, occurred on April 6, 1830.

Reports that Smith had a "gold bible" attracted considerable intrusion and harassment, leading him to relocate in Harmony, Pennsylvania, and later Fayette, New York, before work on the Book of Mormon was complete. But opposition to the new church might have eventually died down if not for a fateful decision Smith made late in 1830. In response to another revelation from God, he announced that converts to the new faith were to be "gathered in unto one place." The initial location for this gathering was Kirtland, Ohio, but shortly thereafter Jackson County, Missouri, was named the site of a New Jerusalem, and most converts headed there even as Smith continued to direct construction of a temple and supervise the church from Ohio. In 1835, he organized the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and the first two Quorums of Seventy. Today, those bodies, together with the First Presidency (the prophet and two counselors), constitute the leadership of the church. The Kirtland temple was dedicated in 1836, though it served more as a meetinghouse than the locale where special rituals and ordinances are performed, as is the case today.

A series of conflicts both internal and external (see below) led to successive displacements of Mormons through several Missouri counties, leading to a period of relatively calm exile in Nauvoo, Illinois (1838–1846). There, the Mormons lived in a virtual city-state of their own construction, while converts poured in from the east and from Great Britain, and doctrine poured forth from Smith. The first wave of converts were mostly Campbellites, followers of Alexander Campbell's (1788–1866) reformed Baptist movement who joined when Campbellite preacher Sidney Rigdon (1793–1876) did in the Kirtland, Ohio, area. Many other converts were "seekers," unaffiliated Christians looking for a form of Christianity that more nearly approximated the New Testament church than contemporary institutions. Smith's insistence that his authority was not just assumed, but actually conferred upon him by heavenly messengers, was a powerful claim, and in nearly all instances, converts

were convinced, after reading it, that the Book of Mormon was the word of God and therefore sure evidence of Smith's authority and legitimacy.

Conflicts in Illinois emerged as they had elsewhere, but compounded in this instance by rumors of Smith's introduction of plural marriage (technically polygyny—a man taking more than one wife—but commonly called polygamy in historical discussions of Mormonism) and his espoused political aspirations (he initiated a campaign for president of the United States in 1844). A vitriolic attack from a dissident newspaper led Smith as Nauvoo's mayor, with the city council's assent, to issue an ill-conceived order declaring the paper a public nuisance. The city marshal accordingly destroyed the offending press, and shortly thereafter Smith was arrested and acquitted (in a Nauvoo court) of inciting a riot. In the ensuing turmoil, and in spite of clear premonitions of his own death, Smith subjected himself to double jeopardy by giving himself up to Carthage, Illinois, authorities. He was murdered the following day (June 27, 1844) by a mob of Carthage militia while under the governor's protection.

Upon Smith's martyrdom, several claimants to be his successor emerged. Most Mormons agreed to the leadership of Brigham Young (1801–1877), president of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles, and followed him west. The largest other group would organize under Joseph's son Joseph Smith III (1832–1914) in 1860 as the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (renamed the Community of Christ in 2000). The main body of Mormons settled in the desolate Salt Lake Valley, which was part of Mexico when they embarked on their westward exodus but became part of the United States as a consequence of the treaty of 1848 following the Mexican War. They organized a provisional government of the State of Deseret in 1849; the Territory of Deseret followed in 1851. With the public avowal of the practice of polygamy in 1852, Mormon Utah entered a protracted struggle with the federal government.

A number of factors conspired to crush Mormon hopes for religious autonomy in the West. First was the federal government's unwillingness to countenance plural marriage, even in a geographically remote setting. The gold rush of 1849 spurred western settlement, and the coming of the railroad effectively sealed the end of Utah's isolation. Conformity with more mainstream values became an imperative if the Mormon Church was going to survive, the territory achieve statehood, and the Mormon people win greater acceptance and respectability in wider American society. The end of polygamy was initiated in 1890, and shortly thereafter Mormons embraced participation in the national political parties, disbanding their own People's Party. Mormon participation in the Chicago Columbian Exposition of 1893 resulted in honors for their Tabernacle Choir, a massed-voice chorus, furthering their quest for participation in the mainstream. Another significant development in this era was the church's cessation of the practice of the gathering (or settling in Mormon communities in Utah); converts were encouraged to build up their churches locally, and in 1895 the first stake (a diocese-like unit) was organized outside the United States (in Canada). Henceforward, the church steered toward an international rather than a primarily Utahan—or even American—composition.

Mormons manned the famous Mormon Battalion in the Mexican War (1846–1848), but mostly out of economic self-interest at a time of impoverished exile. They remained mostly aloof in the Civil War (1861–1865), understandably unenthusiastic about supporting either side. But World War I (1914–1918) provided the American Mormons with an opportunity to prove their unqualified patriotism. Utah's volunteer enlistments were far above quotas, and Red Cross contributions and Liberty Bond purchases similarly exceeded federal requests. Theologically, doctrines were not changing but emphases were. Tithing was rigorously encouraged in 1899, helping the church solve a long-standing crisis precipitated by federal financial oppression. The Word of Wisdom, a rigorous health code, was received in 1833, but was seldom rigorously enforced or observed. That changed as well, with adherence becoming a requirement for temple admission in the 1920s. Another hallmark of modern Mormonism, the church's welfare program, was initiated in the years of the Great Depression (1929–early 1940s). Today, both Mormon values of economic self-reliance and a formidable system of welfare farms, production facilities, distribution centers, and bishop's storehouses are legendary.

Missionary work was always integral to Mormonism. As World War II (1939–1945) approached, successful proselytizing and a high birth rate combined to produce nearly a million members. One of Mormonism's most beloved prophets, David O. McKay (1873–1970), assumed the presidency in 1951. His slogan, "every member a missionary," typified a renewed emphasis on missionary work. His two decades in office saw church membership triple from approximately one to three million members. The following decade was equally dramatic, with a continuing growth rate of 40 percent per decade. Increasingly, the church was becoming a church of the southern hemisphere, with Latin American growth strongest. Spencer W. Kimball's (1895–1985) 1978 revelation extending the priesthood to blacks alleviated tensions with African Americans, and opened Africa and northern Brazil to missionary work with dramatic results. Growth among the American black community, however, remained modest.

Ezra Taft Benson (1899–1994), former Secretary of Agriculture under President Dwight D. Eisenhower, became church president in 1985. His lasting legacy was an emphasis on the Book of Mormon that effectively elevated that scripture to a central place in Mormon doctrine and devotional life. By the early years of the new millennium, more than 120 million copies of the Book were in print, making it the most widely published and distributed book ever produced by an American.

After a brief presidency by Howard W. Hunter (1907–1995), Gordon B. Hinckley (b. 1910) assumed the position of "prophet, seer, and revelator" in the Mormon Church. The most media-savvy leader the church has known, Hinckley improved relations with the press, put an articulate and good-humored face on modern Mormonism, and inaugurated a program of prolific temple building that dwarfed all previous efforts.

By the year 2000, Mormon membership passed 11 million, and it is now one of the largest Christian denominations in the United States. Much debated claims that Mormonism is the next world religion, and the first to emerge since Islam, are

probably premature. But phenomenal growth continues in Latin America, and relatively small but growing populations exist scattered throughout Asia and Africa. The nineteenth century church depended largely on Great Britain and northern Europe for its convert base; those areas appear now to be stagnant in terms of LDS growth. What appears certain is that Mormonism is no longer an American religion. Since 2000, more members speak Spanish than English, a trend sure to continue in the new millennium.

## PEOPLE, FOUNDERS, AND LEADERS

### Joseph Smith

Joseph's position in the LDS church is more than first in a line of prophets that continues to this day. Of the three books of scripture Mormons use in addition to the Bible (The Book of Mormon, the *Pearl of Great Price*, and the *Doctrine and Covenants*), Smith produced two in their entirety and virtually all of the third. As a revealer of new doctrines, Smith was in his most prolific phase when his life was cut short. Temple ordinances, radical teachings on the nature and origin of God, and a doctrine of human theosis, or humanity's literal potential to become like God, all emerged out of the Nauvoo years. In fact, no significant addition to LDS theology or practice occurred after his death, making him effectively a Mormon prophet without parallel. Like Muslims, Mormons use the term "the prophet" as a synonym for their religion's founder (although it can also refer in contemporary contexts to whomever occupies that position currently).

The sources of Smith's ideas, organizational genius, and influence over his followers are widely disputed. Followers believe he enjoyed communion with God after the pattern of Moses—face to face encounters involving dialogic revelation, with Smith asking questions and receiving specific, articulate responses. These encounters were supplemented by angelic assistance from a host of resurrected beings. His gift of seership, initially the ability to translate gold plates with the aid of a seerstone and a device called the Urim and Thummim, eventually developed into the ability to recover a number of ancient texts independently of any manuscript, produced by biblical figures such as Adam, Abraham, Enoch, Moses, and John. Nonmembers ascribe his production of these writings to sheer inventiveness, familiarity with hermetic and esoteric sources, or simply a "genius" for "uncanny recovery of elements in ancient Jewish theurgy."<sup>2</sup> His powerful charismatic appeal was attributed to mesmerism by legions of early writers, but his devotion to his people was noted by all, and his willingness to suffer on their behalf elicited a reciprocal loyalty and a reverence that continues today.

### Brigham Young

Brigham Young occupies a close second as the prophet who was most influential in shaping the nature and direction of Mormonism. He lacked Smith's gift—or felt the need had largely been fulfilled—for "thus saith the Lord" pronouncements and

doctrinal revelations. As a leader and colonizer, he is without parallel in American history. He masterminded the largest migration of American citizens in history, supervised the founding of hundreds of communities in the intermountain West, fostered a prosperous and thriving Mormon subculture that numbered over 100,000 at his death, and made his imprint felt on every aspect of Mormon life and society for more than three decades. Until the United States government intervened, he successfully organized and managed a virtual theocracy.

Relentlessly pragmatic, plainspoken, and often confrontational, Young was (justly) suspicious of federal authorities and intentions, resisted incursions of "gentile" (non-Mormon) influence, and disliked "philosophy." At the same time, he was progressive and liberal enough to found the Salt Lake Theatre, continue Smith's support for education in the new territory, and encourage the professional training and rights of women.

### **Eliza R. Snow**

Eliza Roxey Snow (1804–1887) had the unique distinction of being wed to two prophets (Smith and Young) and being sister to a third, the fifth prophet Lorenzo Snow (1814–1901). But independent of those connections, Snow was one of early Mormonism's finest poets, intellectuals, and role models for women. She played a key role in founding the Relief Society (one of the largest and oldest women's organizations in the world), sending LDS women to eastern medical schools, encouraging their engagement in politics, and founding a women's journal, *The Woman's Exponent*. She also was influential in establishing a popular but never developed and seldom-discussed doctrine of Mormonism, a Mother in Heaven, through one of the most beloved hymns in Mormonism, "Oh My Father." The words also give expression to the LDS doctrine of premortal existence, invoking a time when "in some first primeval childhood [I was] nurtured near thy side."

### **Parley P. Pratt**

If Smith was the revealer of most Mormon doctrines, Parley Pratt (1807–1857) was one of the first to organize them and present them in a suitable form for mass public consumption. His *Voice of Warning* (1837), the first sustained exposition of Mormon doctrine, remained a staple in the missionary repertoire well into the twentieth century. Pratt was himself an indefatigable missionary, serving on over 20 mission tours, as well as being a self-taught man of letters. He produced the most literary Mormon autobiography of his generation, as well as numerous hymns still used and the church's first works of fiction, such as the 1844 "Dialogue of Joseph Smith and the Devil."

### **James E. Talmage**

James Talmage (1862–1933) was a brilliant educator, scholar, and internationally recognized scientist who brought erudition and academic training to the task of a

Mormon theology. His two landmark works had the distinction of being commissioned by the Church, and retain a quasi-canonical status. *The Articles of Faith: Being a Consideration of the Principal Doctrines of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (1899) is a systematic exposition of the 13 tenets listed by Smith as a summary of LDS teachings. He followed this in 1915 with *Jesus the Christ: A Study of the Messiah and his Mission*, still the definitive LDS work on christology. His work on *The Great Apostasy* (1909), though now somewhat dated, also established LDS views on the historical reality of the corruption of Christianity and a need for full restoration rather than reformation. Talmage was one of a generation of church intellectuals who demonstrated a successful synthesis of secular and spiritual approaches to the gospel. His calling as an apostle (a level of church leadership) and role as expounder of church doctrine affirmed the early Mormon Church's emphasis on intelligence as "the glory of God."

## **Hugh W. Nibley**

Hugh Nibley (1910–2005) was the dominant Mormon intellectual of postwar Mormonism. His influence was primarily felt among Latter-day Saints hungry for intellectual foundations to the Book of Mormon, the ancient writings gathered in the Pearl of Great Price, and temple theology. His work on the Book of Mormon, in particular, creates a compelling case for Near Eastern elements bespeaking a genuinely ancient provenance to the text. Competent in several ancient and modern languages, Nibley was the first Mormon apologist to earn the praise of prominent non-LDS scholars of biblical and ancient Near Eastern studies and even the grudging respect of Protestant evangelicals.

Within the LDS community, Nibley also exerted unparalleled influence as a critic of Mormon culture, relentlessly attacking what he saw as departures from early Mormonism's teachings on the environment, materialism, and intellectual engagement. His rhetorical flamboyance and personal idiosyncrasies won him a devoted following, even as the former alienated some colleagues and critics of the church. His legacy is fairly assured through approximately 20 volumes of collected works.

## **BELIEFS AND PRACTICES**

When it comes to distinctive LDS teachings and doctrines, the Book of Mormon occupies a special place. Published and advertised for sale even before the Church came into being, the new book of scripture was perhaps more important for what it embodied than for what it promulgated. As a new revelation from heaven, the book represented a reopening of communication between humanity and God, a renewed covenant, and new dispensation. And it set Smith apart among myriad nineteenth century claimants to prophetic authority as one who produced tangible, verifiable evidence of his divine calling. The Book of Mormon was therefore a dramatic sign that distinguished Mormonism as a religion of new prophets and new revelation. Smith inaugurated Mormonism with this emphasis on the form and



accessibility, rather than the content, of divine knowledge, with his first words upon returning from the Sacred Grove, the forested spot near his Palmyra, New York, home where he had his first vision of God the Father and Jesus Christ: "I have learned for myself,..." Likewise, the Book of Mormon enjoins readers to "ask of God" if the record is true, and promises that "by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of all things" (Moroni 10:5). This emphasis on what Latter-day Saints call "personal revelation" is both a core principle of Mormonism and the bedrock for all other principles.

After the church was organized, Smith experienced repeated visions and revelations, and elaborated a fairly comprehensive theology that departed from other Christian creeds in fundamental ways, even as he claimed to restore the authority and organization that characterized the church that Christ established. The entire program of gospel restoration was predicated on the belief, affirmed to Smith in his "First Vision," that all Christian groups had departed from the true gospel order, in a universal or "Great" apostasy. Unlike other restorationists that likewise believed the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century had not gone far enough in recuperating original Christianity, Smith taught that even Adam was taught the gospel, baptized, and given the gift of the Holy Ghost. Christ himself, in other words, was restoring, rather than inaugurating, gospel teachings and ordinances.

Smith also differed from most other religious innovators of his day in affirming the need for manifest evidence of divine authority to act in God's name. In his case, he insisted that he received such "priesthood" authority to perform rituals called ordinances in God's name, by the personal appearing of a resurrected John the Baptist in May 1829, who ordained Smith to the Aaronic Priesthood. Subsequently, he claimed receipt of the higher, or Melchizedek Priesthood, by the resurrected apostles of Christ, Peter, James, and John. Thus, he asserted the same kind of continuity that is the basis for Roman Catholicism's claim to authority: literal apostolic succession.

First and notably different among the beliefs Smith restored was the conception of the godhead. Joseph echoed historical Christianity in considering God the Father to be the supreme being and object of worship, and in holding Jesus Christ to be God's divinely begotten son, the Savior who atoned for the sins of the human race, and the Savior who was literally resurrected from death. Salvation, for Latter-day Saints, is impossible independent of Jesus Christ's freely given sacrifice of himself on mankind's behalf in the crucifixion. In this cardinal sense, Latter-day Saints are clearly and undeniably Christian. But flying in the face of Trinitarian formulations, Smith declared that "the Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man's; the Son also" [D&C 130:22]. The Holy Spirit or Holy Ghost, as the third member of the godhead, is not corporeal but exists as a "personage of spirit." Not canonized or fully incorporated into church teaching, but taught by Smith as well, was the further claim that "God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens."

Smith's conception of humankind was as radical as his views on deity. Humanity, he declared, was eternally existent, inherently innocent, boundlessly free, and infinitely perfectible. "Man was also in the beginning with God. Intelligence, or the light

of truth, was not created or made, neither indeed can be," he wrote (D&C 93:29). Latter-day Saints accordingly believe that human existence recedes infinitely into the past, incorporating a premortal state in which we lived in God's presence as his literal spirit offspring. Mortality is a probationary period in which humans both demonstrate and improve upon moral qualities, under conditions of trial, opposition, and temptation.

Existing before the fall of Adam, humanity cannot therefore be seen as emerging out of a context of corruption or originating from fallen parentage. Therefore, "Every spirit of man was innocent in the beginning; and God having redeemed man from the fall, men became again, in their infant state, innocent before God (D&C 93:38). Though we are born into a world of sin and obtain human bodies subject to weakness and sinful appetite, Mormons believe we inherit neither sin nor guilt. Infant baptism is thus redundant at best and sacrilege at worst, since it denies both the inherent innocence of God's divine progeny and the efficacy of Christ's atonement, which does away with the effect of Adam's sin.

Every human being has agency, or moral freedom, which is, in fact, an inalienable characteristic of the human spirit as constituted by God. "All truth is independent in that sphere in which God has placed it, to act for itself, as all intelligence also; otherwise there is no existence" (D&C 93:30). Or as Smith wrote more simply, God affirmed such freedom in our mortal context when, "in the Garden of Eden, gave I unto man his agency" (Moses 7:32, Pearl of Great Price). Freedom of choice was, in fact, the subject of the war in heaven between the great archangel Michael and his angels and the dragon and his angels, alluded to in Revelation 12, according to writings produced by Smith. The privileged position that accountability and freedom of choice occupy informs the Mormon political, cultural, and theological sensibility.

Finally, Smith taught that humanity can become even as God is. "You have got to learn how to make yourselves Gods," he said, "by going from a small capacity to a great capacity, from a small degree to another, from grace to grace, until the resurrection of the dead, from exaltation to exaltation—till you are able to sit in everlasting burnings and everlasting power and glory." Joseph F. Smith (1838–1918), sixth president of the church, confirmed that "as the infant son of an earthly father and mother is capable in due time of becoming a man, so the undeveloped offspring of celestial parentage is capable, by experience through ages and aeons, of evolving into a God."<sup>3</sup>

In this perspective, part of the eternal destiny that awaits the righteous is the opportunity to continue in family relationships beyond mortal life. Through special ordinances, men and women may be sealed to each other for time and eternity, and children to their parents, in a chain of associations that can extend infinitely in both directions. Interpreting the promises made to the biblical patriarch Abraham literally, Latter-day Saints believe that those who receive exaltation in the Celestial kingdom of God (the highest of three levels of heaven in Mormon thought) may also sire an endless posterity of spirit offspring, in the same way that the human family are spirit offspring of a Heavenly Father. The essence of exaltation or eternal life, for

Latter-day Saints, is this capacity and privilege to enjoy and perpetuate eternal family relationships.

Mormons are quasi-universalists. They believe that virtually all people will be saved in one of three kingdoms of glory—which are demarcated the Celestial, the Terrestrial, and the Telestial—although exaltation pertains to the highest order within the Celestial kingdom alone, and an unfortunate few who willfully persist in rebellion against God and his Christ will be consigned, through their own determined choices, to an uncertain fate as “sons of perdition.” The God of Mormonism is hence a God who is above all else a generous and merciful God who must nonetheless honor the agency that he gave to the human race, whose members will receive the greatest rewards and blessings “which they are willing to receive.”

To create a holy place where eternal marriages and other sacred ordinances can be performed, Latter-day Saints erect temples. Unlike meetinghouses, buildings for normal Sunday worship open to Mormon and visitor alike, temples are entered only by those who aspire to live by the strictest requirements of faithfulness, as manifested by a “temple recommend” bestowed after interviews with ecclesiastical leaders. Mormons believe that deceased individuals are subject to the same requirements imposed on the living if they hope for salvation. They must accept Christ and the ordinances, beginning with baptism, that he stipulated. But Mormons also believe that God is just, and therefore he made provisions that those who die in ignorance can be taught the gospel and have sacred ordinances performed on their behalf by the living. Such “work for the dead” is also conducted in the temples. As evidence that ancient Christians performed such rituals, including the baptizing of living proxies on behalf of deceased ancestors and others, Latter-day Saints refer to Paul’s rhetorical question to the Corinthians, “If the dead rise not at all, why are they then baptized for the dead?” (I Corinthians 15:29).

The “strict requirements” that manifest the life of a devout Mormon include adherence to a health code, known as the Word of Wisdom, which mandates moderation in diet and abstinence from alcohol, tobacco, tea, and coffee. The code also enjoins sparing consumption of meat, use of grains, and enjoyment of fruits and herbs “in their season.” Mormons must also comply with the Old Testament law of tithing, paying ten percent of their income to the church. LDS financial offerings thus tend to be much higher than in other Christian denominations. Part of the reason is that temple goers must be full tithe payers, and part of the reason is undoubtedly the culture of sacrifice intrinsic to Mormonism. Faithful members are also expected to conform to the law of chastity, which means no premarital or extramarital sexual relations. The importance of this principle, like the Word of Wisdom, is doubtless related to the biblical concept of the human body as a temple of God. But it receives additional significance from the unique belief that procreation is no mere biological convention for the peopling of the earth, but a sacred power that in the eternities pertains to godhood itself. The emphasis bears tangible results. Studies consistently show that LDS youth and adults alike practice sexual chastity at significantly higher levels than members of other groups.

Adherence to the Mormon faith also requires a commitment to Christian service. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has no professional clergy. Except for the General Authorities, who constitute the central leadership based in Salt Lake, virtually all positions in the Church are filled by lay workers. Even bishops, who preside over local congregations called wards, and stake presidents, who preside over groupings of wards called stakes, perform their demanding service voluntarily, in addition to their professional and family commitments. Typical wards require volunteer service in 100 or more other positions called "callings." At the age of 19, young men are expected to serve for two full years, at their own expense, as proselytizing missionaries. Retired couples are also encouraged to serve, often doing so in the areas of education or humanitarian services. Young women are not expected to serve, but many thousands do so every year. Missionary work is considered primarily a responsibility pertaining to the priesthood, and Mormons follow the primitive church in restricting the priesthood to worthy males only.

Modeled in part on the New Testament church, the LDS church has a prophet as its head, assisted by two counselors, with the Quorum of Twelve Apostles ranking next in the hierarchy. The apostolic succession restored by Smith continues to the present, with Latter-day Saints sustaining the present leader as "prophet, seer, and revelator" of the church. "Modern revelation" or "continuing revelation" thus remains the distinguishing feature of LDS church leadership. Though the manifestations of this model are not as dramatic as in the days of Smith and Young, Mormons continue nonetheless to accept the prophet as the literal spokesman for God. In a practice that avoids any semblance of politicking or lobbying, the senior apostle is routinely ordained the new prophet upon the death of his predecessor.

Under the direction of the Twelve Apostles are several Quorums of Seventy, and then Area Authorities responsible for vast geographical units. Within those units, the next descending level of organization is the stake, presided over by a president and two counselors, and comprising five to a dozen wards and branches (a branch is a unit with generally fewer members and leadership resources than a ward).

Two areas of Mormon culture with roots in revealed theology are welfare and education. Historians have commented on the peculiar tendency, in Mormonism, to "exalt ... economics and economic welfare into an important, if not indispensable, element of religious salvation."<sup>4</sup> Smith experimented with communalism to obviate poverty, and Young famously ordered relief expeditions to save starving handcart pioneers (Mormon settlers traveling westward to Utah) with the words, "that is my religion, ... to save the people." In the 1930s, leaders centralized a churchwide welfare program, intended to replace "the curse of idleness" and the indignity of the dole with principles of self-reliance and industry. Accordingly, the church began acquiring farms and processing facilities and building "bishop's storehouses" to serve as storage and distribution centers for the needy. Centered on a ten-acre complex in Salt Lake City known as Welfare Square, the church's massive operations today include 172,000 acres of farmland, 199 agricultural production projects, 51 canneries, and 63 grain storage facilities feeding into 113 central, regional, and branch storehouses.<sup>5</sup>

In recent years, those relief efforts extended far beyond the church's own membership. Over 2,400 humanitarian missionaries serve in Welfare Services worldwide, and efforts reach 150 countries, including disaster assistance efforts in North Korea, Africa, Europe, South America, and Afghanistan.

Aiming to solve poverty at the source, the church launched the Perpetual Education Fund (PEF) in 2001, modeled on the Perpetual Education Fund that financed the immigration and resettlement of nineteenth century converts. Over 30,000 immigrants used needed monies, and then paid back into the fund to finance fellow recipients. The new PEF targets returned Mormon missionaries in underdeveloped nations, providing low-cost educational loans. Over 6,000 men and women benefited from the 100 million dollars raised for the effort in the first two years alone.

Education always had a prominent place in Mormon faith and culture, since Smith founded an evening school for adults, "the School of the Prophets," in Kirtland in 1833, where they studied the gospel but also Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. In Nauvoo, Illinois, though economically crippled and scattered by the Missouri persecutions, Mormons organized a university shortly after draining the swampland and erecting the first buildings. They repeated the effort three years after entering the Salt Lake Valley, founding the University of Deseret in 1850. "The glory of God is intelligence" (D&C 93:36), Smith wrote in 1833, and later recorded the inspiring claim that "whatever principle of intelligence we attain unto in this life, it will rise with us in the resurrection. And if a person gains more knowledge and intelligence in this life through his diligence and obedience than another, he will have so much the advantage in the world to come" (DC 130:18–19). Mormon emphasis on the life of the mind is evident today in their operation of the largest private, church-sponsored universities in the United States. Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, has 35,000 students and the number one ranked "great college library" according to one prestigious review.<sup>6</sup> A culture of learning is also evident in the fact that, as one study remarks, American Latter-day Saints maintain "a standard of educational attainment that is significantly higher than the national average." Interestingly, the effect of this educational engagement produces in the case of Mormons a somewhat anomalous result. In contrast to the tendency for educational attainment to dampen religious ardor, researchers find in the case of Mormon men that "the higher the level of education, the higher one's religious observance.... The same findings hold generally true for Mormon women."<sup>7</sup>

## SCRIPTURES

Latter-day Saints follow other Christians in affirming the Bible as the word of God, "as far as it is translated correctly" according to one of their articles of faith. They are devout students of the scriptures and generally read the Bible as a historical, inspired record, tending toward literalism in their interpretation with some exceptions. They do not, for instance, read the creation story of Adam and Eve literally, neither do they regard the days of creation literally or, as a rule, the universal flood.

The Bible is for Mormons a principal source of church sermons, gospel study, and proselytizing efforts.

The Book of Mormon is perhaps the scripture that people most associate with the church and is the source of their unofficial name, though it was at first intended as a term of derision—"Mormonites," which soon became shortened to "Mormons." In its essentials, the Book of Mormon is theologically congruent with the Bible. It affirms that Jesus is the Christ and espouses a gospel of faith, repentance, baptism, and the gift of the Holy Ghost. In addition to both embodying and representing a version of divine revelation that is as literal as Old Testament instances, though more egalitarian in its manifestations, the Book of Mormon presents few novel doctrines. It does pronounce the fall of Adam and Eve fortunate, part of a divinely instigated plan, and also expounds a doctrine of Christ's atonement, or vicarious sacrifice on behalf of humankind, with more doctrinal detail than the New Testament. The most remarkable aspect of the record is probably its account of a visit of the resurrected Christ to the ancient inhabitants of the Western Hemisphere and the subsequent establishment of a Christian church with twelve "disciples." Even earlier, according to the record, a church was established that looked forward to the coming of a Christ while keeping the Mosaic Law. The LDS faith's emphasis on the Book of Mormon historically derives from the fact that Smith's claim to prophetic authority rose or fell on the validity of the record he claimed to translate by the gift and power of God. The Book of Mormon is, in that respect, the "keystone of Mormonism."

Smith received dozens of revelations supposedly from God during his lifetime. Many of these were selected for publication as the *Book of Commandments* in 1833, subsequently reissued as the *Doctrine and Covenants*. A few additions were made in the years since, most recently in 1981. The *Doctrine and Covenants* contains more of those teachings that are distinctively LDS, such as the law of tithing, the health code known as "the Word of Wisdom," the concept of a godhead consisting of three separate and distinct entities, the offices and duties pertaining to the priesthood, three distinct kingdoms of glory, and more.

The fourth and final book of scripture rounding out the LDS "Standard Works" is the *Pearl of Great Price*. It consists of ancient writings attributed to Abraham, a selection of the writings of Moses absent from or corrupted in the Old Testament version, an account of Smith's personal history, a revision of Matthew chapter 24, and the church's Articles of Faith. Especially notable, parts of the *Pearl of Great Price* include a report of a pre-Mortal Council in Heaven, and the record of the ancient biblical prophet Enoch.

Besides producing three books of scripture in addition to the Bible, Smith also spent a few years working on what he called a new "translation of the Bible," although it was actually a recension, since he did not work with original manuscripts, but proceeded to make changes and additions under what he felt was divine inspiration. Although the LDS church never adopted his edited work as its official version, many (though far from all) of the changes he introduced were incorporated as footnotes in the current (1979) King James Version of the Bible used by the LDS church.

## CONTROVERSIES AND ISSUES

Mormonism has been steeped in controversy since its boy prophet first claimed that God and Christ had personally visited him.. Publishing a record that supposedly recounted ancient American history inscribed on gold plates, recorded by descendants of Israelites, delivered up by an angel, and translated by "the gift and power of God," elicited both mockery and suspicion. Hostility was also aroused, then as now, by those who believed the Bible was the complete and sufficient word of God and saw the new scripture as a blasphemous affront to a settled canon.

An infelicitous combination of other factors conspired to turn hostility into violent confrontation and persecution. Had they simply lived among other American citizens, Mormons might have aroused no more notice than the scores of other idiosyncratic movements spawned by the religious ferment of the Second Great Awakening. But mere months after their 1830 organization, Smith revealed to his followers that the Old Testament prophecies of an Israel gathered in from her long dispersion were to be literally fulfilled. Accordingly, Mormons gathered in Kirtland, Ohio, and shortly thereafter in Independence, Missouri. Financial catastrophe and internal dissension destroyed the Ohio base, while on the western frontier, frictions with other settlers quickly escalated. Mormon claims to new scripture, heavenly manifestations, and spiritual gifts, combined with their practice of labeling outsiders "gentiles" and their rhetoric of Missouri being the land of their inheritance quickly alienated neighbors. Preaching to the Native Americans, whom they labeled "Lamanites" and considered chosen descendants of Israelites, angered Missourians, and charges that these Northern immigrants were abolitionists was an especially volatile allegation in pro-slavery Missouri. Finally, the sheer number of converts gathering in sparsely populated areas quickly made Mormons the dominant political power and led to violence. Successive confrontations forced the saints to leave Jackson County, Missouri, then Caldwell County, and then, following a massacre of Mormons at Haun's Mill, they were forced to leave the state altogether.

Welcomed across the Mississippi into Illinois, the saints established a prosperous city called Nauvoo, with a majestic temple, a fledgling university, and a thousands-strong Nauvoo Legion, or militia. But old tensions reemerged; additionally, reports circulated that Smith and others were practicing plural marriage, concerns grew that the Mormon courts gave church members unprecedented exemption from legal accountability, and genuine alarm set in when Smith announced his candidacy for the presidency of the United States in early 1844. Months later, he was murdered with his brother Hyrum in a Carthage, Illinois, jail, and Mormons were once again forced to flee en masse. Most chose to remove westward under Young.

They settled in the Salt Lake Valley in 1847, and five years later publicly announced their practice of plural marriage. At that point another wave of confrontation began, leading to invasion by federal forces in 1857 and a barrage of laws and court rulings that by 1890 stripped the church of its assets and its members of the right to vote, and resulted in the imprisonment or flight of Mormon leaders and

the virtual destruction of the church itself. Throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, popular fiction included sensationalist accounts of Mormons that appealed to anti-Mormont sentiment, fear of the foreign, and all things lurid—further compounding Mormonism's alienation from the mainstream. By 1890, President Wilford Woodruff (1807–1898) announced that God had relieved the Mormon people of the responsibility to practice plural marriage, and the Americanization of Mormonism began in earnest. Statehood came at last, after repeated rebuffs, in 1893, though as late as 1904 the United States Senate held hearings on whether to seat the newly elected Reed Smoot (1862–1941), Mormon apostle from Utah.

With occasional setbacks, Mormons were increasingly perceived by the American public as hardworking, family-oriented, and patriotic, and the church was recognized for its moral teachings, efficient organization, and success in caring for its own. No serious conflicts with larger society erupted until the 1960s, when attention on civil rights focused the spotlight on the LDS practice of barring persons of African ancestry from the priesthood. The church weathered that storm, enduring bouts of negative publicity, only to change their policy when much of the storm had abated. In 1978, President Kimball announced that the Lord directed him to make the priesthood available to all worthy males regardless of race or ancestry.

In the years since the priesthood announcement, Mormonism is often invoked as an institution that typifies the best of Christian values, rather than as an instance of unacceptable heterodoxy, as it was in the nineteenth century. Except for occasional protests from Christian fundamentalists, who protest the appellation of Christian to a religion that embraces unorthodox notions of the Trinity and other anomalous doctrines, most people in the United States and throughout the world view Latter-day Saints with respect and acceptance.

At present, few controversies persist. Like Catholicism, Mormonism still does not bestow the priesthood upon women. Most Mormons are comfortable with this doctrine, and no significant agitation for change is on the horizon. The history of Mormon women has, in fact, been one of paradox and surprise. Portrayed by politicians, novelists, and moral crusaders as victims of an oppressive system, plural wives were adamant in defending their own right to engage in the practice and publicly demonstrated by the thousands against federal interference. Social historians noted that the system actually allowed LDS women an uncommon degree of social and economic power. Utah women were the first in the United States to exercise the right to vote (in 1870) and were accorded educational opportunities and encouragement in many cases comparable to their male peers. Mormon theology, while patriarchal in priesthood rights, is in other ways profoundly feminist. Mormons espouse, for example, belief in a "mother in Heaven" (sung about in a popular hymn, though seldom discussed), and believe, as Joseph Fielding Smith (1876–1972) put it succinctly, that "a man cannot be exalted [saved] singly and alone."<sup>8</sup>

Occasional criticisms have emerged in foreign quarters that Mormon inroads in their culture is a form of American imperialism, but Mormon insistence on entering



countries through the front door or not at all has earned it a trusting relationship with most of the hundred plus countries where some 60,000 Mormon missionaries now operate. Since 2000, Mormonism has more members outside the United States than within, but because the top leaders serve for life, change in the national and ethnic constitution of that leadership lags far behind changing demographics church-wide. The first non-North American was called to the Quorum of the Twelve in 2004 (from Germany), and as yet no Latin American member, where most members reside and where growth is strongest, serves in that quorum.

One area of internal friction emerged in the 1960s with the professionalization of Mormon studies. Long divided between vehement critics and faithful apologists, the study of Mormonism is now of vital interest to American historians, sociologists of religion, and cultural scholars. In addition, the development of archaeology, anthropology, and other disciplines made it possible to subject the Book of Mormon to scholarly scrutiny with a new intellectual professionalism. Some Mormons pleaded for a more naturalistic approach to Mormon history, and a less literal acceptance of the historical claims of and about the Book of Mormon.

At the same time, a powerful Church Correlation program, which aims to unify and centralize all church programs and instruction, and is especially attentive to the millions of newer members from less developed nations, tends toward less, not more, intellectual engagement with Mormon history and doctrine. In addition, the Church, through its own historians and scholars working out of both Brigham Young University and its own historical department, continues to produce high-quality scholarship predicated upon and reaffirming the traditional rendering of Mormon history and the legitimacy of the Book of Mormon as ancient history. One observer writes that all these competing tensions amount to “a crisis comparable to but more profound than that which Roman Catholicism recognized around the time of the Second Vatican Council.”<sup>9</sup> That is an overstatement, since the crisis in the LDS case is not felt beyond the more intellectual strata of the church. But frictions have led to occasional excommunications of dissident scholars and also feminists, who are perceived to be engaging in the work of publicly undermining the teachings and mission of the church.

The church has also attracted occasional criticism for its involvement in political issues in the United States. The church’s opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment is largely viewed as being the deciding factor in its 1982 defeat. More recently, the church supported state initiatives aimed at defending traditional definitions of marriage, as opposed to gay and lesbian marriage, and issued a “statement of principle” in support of “a constitutional amendment preserving marriage as the lawful union of a man and a woman.”<sup>10</sup> The church also has a long-standing and publicly expressed opposition to abortion. On at least one occasion, the church demonstrated that its positions can cut across both major political parties when President Kimball issued a public statement opposing the MX missile plan in 1981. In all these cases the church is unapologetic, insisting on its right to express public positions on issues of national moral significance.

## THE FUTURE

In 1984, sociologist Rodney Stark predicted that some people then alive could live to see the LDS church grow from its six or seven million to 267 million by the year 2080.<sup>11</sup> Though criticized as extravagant by fellow scholars, an unapologetic Stark returned to the subject in 1999, insisting that “membership is substantially higher than my most optimistic projection.”<sup>12</sup> Stark’s numbers do not factor in the number of LDS defections or lapses into inactivity—which can be considerable, especially in high-growth areas. Even so, the LDS church clearly continues to grow at a prodigious rate, and it remains a highly cohesive international community, with little internal dissension, history of or prospect for significant schism, or impediments to continued success. President Hinckley was apparently in earnest when he claimed in 1999 that the two greatest challenges facing the church were providing sufficient local leadership and houses of worship to keep pace with member growth. (New meeting-house construction at that time was proceeding at a 400-buildings-per-year rate.<sup>13</sup>) Other challenges will undoubtedly involve the growing internationalization of a church long identified as an American institution with a historic connection to its Utah base.

Until now, Mormon culture has largely been defined by the history of persecution and alienation, geographical isolation, and beliefs and practices sharply at odds with prevailing norms. In the era of the international church, the special role the United States served in Mormon history and theology will necessarily receive less emphasis. In addition, with an increasing proportion of members being recent converts, the role of collective memory in giving shape to a shared identity will diminish. Since the administration of President Benson (1985–1994), the vastly heightened role of the Book of Mormon in Mormon devotional life may emerge as a more conspicuous nexus of Mormon faith and cultural grammar. In addition, commensurate with Mormonism’s rise as a religion of millions has been the elaboration of distinctively Mormon modes of cultural expression. Though its architecture is mostly eclectic, and its art and music have yet to carve out distinguished niches, Mormon literature and, more recently, Mormon filmmaking include superior works that articulate distinctive Mormon themes in an artistic language while still resonating across the wider culture. Such developments suggest that Mormonism stands poised to find continued success in combining successful integration into larger society with a powerful sense of group identity and cultural distinctness.

## CONCLUSION

A major achievement of Mormonism is its global spread while forging a coherent and recognizable Mormon culture that transcends geographical and ethnic boundaries. Mormonism has proven itself more resistant than mainline Protestant churches to the influences of secularism and modernity. Though its leadership is increasingly aged and unfailingly conservative on moral and social issues, the rank and file still accord the church president the same status enjoyed by Smith as the literal prophet,

seer, and revelator of the Lord. And recent church presidents have tended to downplay those doctrines that served to distinguish Mormonism from mainline churches, while increasing church participation in international humanitarian efforts. The overall effect has been a twenty-first century church that, even as it embraces a pioneer past, modern prophets, and distinctive doctrines of deity, enjoys amicable relations with other faiths and assumes a comfortable place at the interdenominational table of those churches whose priority is alleviating suffering, doing good, and leading lives of service and integrity.

## NOTES

1. The Russian writer Leo Tolstoi remarked to Andrew D. White, then president of Cornell University, that "the Mormon people teach the American religion." *Improvement Era* 32.2 (February 1939); Harold Bloom remarks on "how American both [Joseph Smith] and his religion have proved to be." Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 127.
2. Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 101.
3. The First Presidency of the Church, "The Origin of Man," *Improvement Era* 13, no. 1 (November 1909): 81.
4. Leonard J. Arrington, "Religion and Economics in Mormon History," *BYU Studies* 3.3/4 (Spring 1960–Summer 1961): 15.
5. Garth L. Mangum, "Welfare Projects," in *Historical Atlas of Mormonism* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 140.
6. Princeton Review, cited in "Study Gives Y High Marks," *Deseret Morning News*, August 17, 2004.
7. Stan L. Albrecht and Tim B. Heaton, "Secularization, Higher Education, and Religiosity," in *Latter-day Saint Social Life: Social Research on the LDS Church and its Members*, ed. James T. Duke (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1998), 302, 310–11.
8. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 3 vols., ed. Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1955), 2:65.
9. Martin E. Marty, "Two Integrities: An Address to the Crisis in Mormon Historiography," *Journal of Mormon History* 10 (1983): 3.
10. "First Presidency Issues Statement on Marriage," July 7, 2004, [newsroom.lds.org](http://newsroom.lds.org).
11. "The Rise of a New World Faith," *Review of Religious Research* 26, no. 1 (September 1984): 19, 22–23.
12. "Extracting Social Scientific Models from Mormon History," *Journal of Mormon History* 25, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 176.
13. Address of President Gordon B. Hinckley to the Los Angeles World Affairs Council, May 13, 1999.

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